REPORT OF FINDINGS: INNOKO NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE PLACER MINING STUDY

Prepared for:

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Ву

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INTRODUCTION

The Innoko National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) was established in 1960 with the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. It covers approximately 3,850,000 acres in west-central Alaska (Figure 1). Purposes of the refuge under the Act include:

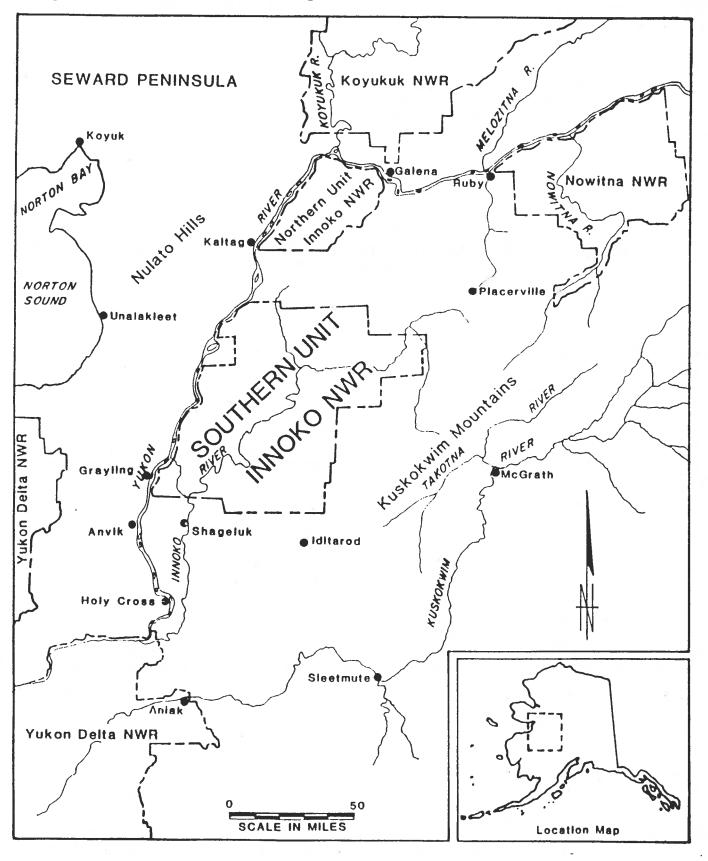
- (i) to conserve fish and wildlife populations and habitats in their natural diversity including, but not limited to, waterfowl, peregrine falcons, other migratory birds, black bear, moose, furbearers, and other mammals and salmon. . . .
- (ii) to ensure, to the maximum extent practicable and in a manner consistent with the purposes set forth in paragraph (i), water quality and necessary water quantity within the refuge.

Placer mining has occurred in the headwaters of the Innoko River drainage since the early 1900's. A rise in gold prices in the early 1970's caused a dramatic increase in mining activity. general, placer mines in Alaska have had a history of noncompliance with water quality standards, particularly with respect to turbidity and settleable solids. Regulators have in the past considered stream reclassification as a method of remedying the situation of non-compliance with water quality standards on those streams that are the most heavily mined. approach of changing regulations to fit the needs of the industry would cause further degradation of downstream (refuge) water quality. While most of the mining activity occurs some distance from the refuge boundaries (see Figure 2), there is a concern that these activities, or new mining in streams not currently affected, would cause a deterioration in refuge water quality.

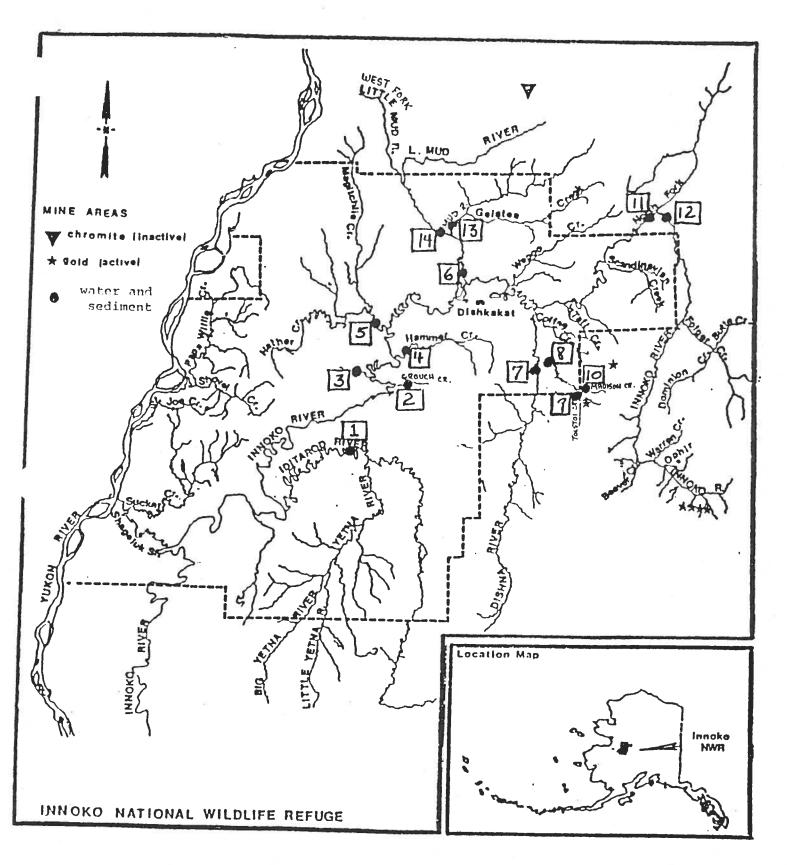
Initial and preliminary grab sampling efforts in 1985 and 1986 (not replicated) indicated that turbidity, copper, zinc and mercury may be elevated. With this concern in mind the Refuge staff decided to determine the background levels of metals in water, sediment, (and a few fish) from selected drainages on the Refuge. A structured monitoring effort was commenced at 12 sites in 1987. Water quality was monitored by establishing sampling points on each of the tributaries of the Innoko River. Inferences as to past quality are allowed by results of bottom samples taken at the same points. Preliminary samples of fish tissue were taken to establish a crude baseline for 1987.

John DeLapp, from the Refuge, conducted the 1985-1988 field efforts. Dr. Rodney Jackson, from the Ecological Services Anchorage office, interpreted the 1987-88 data and authored this report.

Figure 1. Location of Innoko Refuge.



* Figure 2. Sample Site Locations.



Study Area

Figure 2 shows the general location of the Refuge, mining areas and the sample sites. Sample sites 1, 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12 are downstream of mined areas. All other sites serve as controls (for relative comparisons).

Field Procedures

At each site three replicate water samples were taken for recoverable metals; one water sample was taken for total metals analyses. All water samples were placed in 250-ml, acid-cleaned, polyethylene jars with Teflon-lined covers; preserved immediately with nitric acid to a pH of less than 2; and refrigerated until analyses.

At each site three replicate sediment samples (each a composite of three to five grabs) were taken for total metals analyses. All samples were placed in 250-ml, polyethylene jars with Teflonlined covers, and refrigerated until analyses.

All fish (northern pike) were collected with a gill net or with hook and line; fillets for tissue samples were removed from the upper dorsal side with a steel fillet knife, and the skinned fillets were placed in individual, doubled, zip-lock bags and frozen.

Analytical Procedures

Standard techniques of atomic absorption and inductively coupled plasma spectrometry were utilized by Hazelton Laboratories (1987 data) and the Research Triangle Institute (1988 data) to determine concentrations of metals. The quality assurance report of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Laboratory stated that the accuracy of all analyses were generally acceptable; however, the confidence is low for antimony, silver and tin (1988 data only) due to their low recovery.

RESULTS

Complete sets of raw data are on file at the Innoko National Wildlife Refuge and the Ecological Services Anchorage offices. All raw data for 1987 and 1988 are tabulated by element in Appendix B.

Data Interpretation

The process of interpreting chemical analyses is aimed at addressing the question "Do the sample data indicate a problem exists?" In its simplest form this act would appear to consist of comparing each sample datum with a list of action levels or threshold levels (= criteria), above which a problem - albeit undefined - exists. Indeed, this would be ideal. However, a

variety of problems impede this approach.

In the case of water and soil/sediment, the total amount of a chemical reported for a sample is not synonymous with the amount that is (biologically) available. The latter is strongly influenced by a complex suite of physical, chemical and biological factors (e.g. pH, Eh, hardness, alkalinity, salinity, concentration of organic matter, texture). One never has all relevant information for each sample that would allow adjustment of calculated values prior to comparison with a list of criteria (Long and Morgan, 1990; Shea, 1988).

In the case of tissue samples, a different criterion may exist for each species, as well as the particular tissue within that species (e.g. liver vs. kidney vs. muscle vs. whole body homogenate). Moreover, a sublethal criterion (e.g. avoidance, impaired growth, impaired reproductive success) is much lower than a criterion for safe consumption levels or acute mortality. These and other problems with developing a single set of rigid criteria are thoroughly discussed in Long and Morgan (1990) and Soholt, et al (1981). Nevertheless, an arbitrary set of criteria has been subjectively constructed by amalgamating a variety of information including: Environmental Protection Agency's water quality criteria; review papers/series that offer lists of "action levels;" U.S. Food and Drug Administration's action levels for poisonous or deleterious substances in human food; World Health Organization's list of water quality criteria; and sundry literature dealing with some sort of biological effect of one, a few, or a group of individual chemicals. As many of the above sources as time allowed were reviewed prior to finalizing the criteria (Appendix A).

The approach to interpretation consists of a 4-step process, essentially comparing each laboratory-reported value to a series of screens:

- 1. Background or control samples taken from the study area
- 2. The subjective set of criteria (Appendix A)
- Literature values listing averages and ranges for Alaska (Gough, et. al, 1988)
- Literature values listing averages and ranges on a worldwide basis (Fortescue, 1980)

In general, we did not consider a sample value problematical unless it exceeded one order of magnitude of the appropriate screen(s). This is a common strategy designed to provide a buffer for a variety of sources of inherent variance, principally site specificity and laboratory methodology.

In addition to comparing raw data to action levels, appropriate

control sites (unmined streams) were compared to sites on mined streams within a given year. Trends were examined by comparing appropriate sets of 1987 and 1988 data.

Exceedance of Action Levels

Table 1 lists those instances where either a single replicate (or the average of three) exceeded action levels for sediment. Table 2 does the same for water samples.

<u>Sediment.</u> No element exceeded its action level in 1987 data. Average chromium concentrations in 1988 were high; however, <u>all</u> stations except number 14 exceeded action levels. This is a strong indication that an artifact is the cause. Manganese and nickel had individual samples exceeding the action level in 1988, but average concentrations did not exceed the action level. In no case did any site exceed the action level by an order of magnitude or greater.

<u>Water.</u> Table 2 reveals that some water action levels were exceeded, primarily in 1988. Samples at site 3, located on an unmined stream, contained elevated levels of chromium, zinc and tin. Samples at site 12, downstream of mining activities, contained elevated aluminum. In no case did any site exceed the action level by an order of magnitude or greater.

Tissue Analyses

Single samples were available for one year only; hence, comparisons were limited to visual examination of raw data (Appendix B). Action levels were exceeded for two metals: mercury and chromium. Mercury is a potential metal of concern due to it's high absolute concentrations - in controls as well as fish from mined streams. Eisler (1987) proposed 1.0 ppm mercury be used as a criterion for edible portions of fish. Two control and two experimental samples exceeded this level to a slight degree (see Appendix B). Eisler (1986) proposed 4.0 ppm (dry weigh) chromium as a human health criterion for fish muscle tissue. This concentration was exceeded in only one sample -(INNTO7). Chromium, copper, iron, nickel and zinc are somewhat elevated (relative to controls) in sample INNTO7; copper and iron are somewhat elevated in INNTO8. No other relative differences are obvious.

Within-year Comparisons

Several comparisons were made in order to determine if (1) significant contamination had occurred prior to initial sampling, and (2) obvious trends existed. For 1987 and 1988 data (separately), appropriate sites on unmined streams (controls) were visually - not statistically - compared to relevant site(s) downstream of mining activities. In addition, some controls were compared to each other. These ocular examinations are summarized

in Tables 3 and 4. There are scattered incidences where one or a few elements are relatively elevated in either sediment or water samples. However, an element was rarely elevated in both water and sediment at a given site. No element appeared consistently elevated, and no strong trends were apparent.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In general the study area appears to have relatively high background concentrations of several metals, especially chromium, zinc, nickel, and possibly aluminum. In scattered samples, several of the trace metals appear to be in high concentrations, but these are often in control sites. Sites 3 and 5 appear to be the most elevated of the control sites (for sediment and water). As noted earlier in this report, the high chromium sediment levels in 1988 data are possibly artifacts; this supposition is likely accurate given the uniformly high concentrations of chromium.

Comparisons of sediment and water data for mined streams with appropriate controls yield no significant differences (for either year). Comparisons of 1987 versus 1988 data for each site yield no uniform trends. Although tissue mercury levels appear elevated, it does not appear to be caused by mining activities (elevations occur in controls as well as experimentals). One sample of tissue chromium appears elevated, but it does not appear to be cause for concern. It must be emphasized that these conclusions are based on a small set of data.

In no case did any site exceed the sediment or water action level by an order of magnitude. Thus there is no evidence of gross contamination requiring immediate action. It will be prudent to conduct additional monitoring on a regular schedule (every two or three years). The frequency of sampling should be adjusted to reflect the degree of mining activity that may affect refuge resources. Prior to future sampling, your staff must submit a study plan to the Regional Contaminants Coordinator to secure funding.

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Table 1. Elements Exceeding Action Level - Sediment

<u>Sit</u>	e	Elements	(Year)	
1	mined	Cr(88)*		
2	control	Cr(88)*		
3	control	Cr(88)*	Fe(88)	Ni(88)
4	control	Cr(88)*	, ,	, ,
5	control	Cr(88)*		
6	control	Cr(88)*		
7	control	Cr(88)*		
8	mined	Cr(88)*		
9	mined	Cr(88)*		
10	mined	Cr(88)*		
11	mined	Cr(88)*		
12	mined	Cr(88)*		
13	control	Cr(88)*		
14	control	none		

^{*} Indicates that the average of three samples exceeded the action level. Lack of an asterisk indicated only one value in a set exceeded the action level.

Table 2. Elements Exceeding Action Level - Water

<u>si</u>	teª			Elements	(Year)	
1	m		none			
2	C		none			
3	С		Cr(88)*	Ni(88)	Zn(88)	Sn(88)*
4	C				Zn(88)	
5	С		Cr(88)		Zn(88)	Sn(88)
6	C		Cu (8	8)		
7	C	Cd (88	3)			
8	m				Zn(88)	
9	m		none			
10	m		none			
11	m	Al(87)				
12	m	Al(87)*				
13	C		none			
14	C				Zn(88)	

a m denotes site is on a mined stream; c denotes control
(unmined)

^{*} indicates that the average of three samples exceeded the action level. Lack of an asterisk indicates only one value in a set exceeded the action level.

Table 3. Summary of Ocular Comparisons - 1987 Data

Sites Compared	Apparent Ele	
	(=======	(
2,3,4,5 (controls) vs. 1 (mined)	Mn	_
7 (controls) vs. 8 (mined)	-	-
7 (controls) vs. 9 (mined)	***	-
7 (controls) vs. 11 (mined)	Cd	Al, Fe, Mn
7 (controls) vs. 12 (mined)	Cd	Al, Fe, Mn
6,13,14 (controls) vs. 11 (mined)	Mn	Al
6,13,14 (controls) vs. 12 (mined)		Al
6 vs. 13 vs. 14 (all controls)	no obvious	differences
11 (mined) vs. 12 (mined)	sediment l 11 are re	evels of latively high

Table 4. Summary of Ocular Comparisons - 1988 Data

	Sites Compared	Apparent Elev	
7 7 7 7 6,13,14 6,13,14	(controls) vs. 1 (mined) (controls) vs. 8 (mined) (controls) vs. 9 (mined) (controls) vs. 10 (mined) (controls) vs. 11 (mined) (controls) vs. 12 (mined) (controls) vs. 11 (mined) (controls) vs. 12 (mined) (controls) vs. 12 (mined) 13 vs. 14 (all controls)	Cu, Mn, Sn Se Cu, Se Cu 6 and 13 re high in most	
11	(mined) vs. 12 (mined)	most element higher (oppo in 1987 data	

ELEMENT	CRITERIAª	
	<u>Water</u> ^b	Soil/Sediment ^b
Aluminum Antimony Arsenic Barium Beryllium Boron Cadmium Chromium Copper Lead Manganese Mercury Molybdenum Nickel Selenium Silver Tin (inorganic)	400.0 (F);10.(M) 0.6 (F) 0.1 (F); 0.02 (M) 50.0 (F) 12.0 (F) 0.003 (F); 0.009 (M) 0.03 (F); 1.2 (M) 0.01 (F); 0.005 (M) 0.02 (F); 0.01 (M) 7.0 (F); 2.0 (M) 0.002 (F); 0.0003 (M) 50.0 (F) 0.3 (F); 2.0 (M) 0.3 (F); 0.4 (M) 0.01 (F); 0.01 (M) 0.05 (F); 0.3 (M) 0.0001 (F); 0.01 (M) 0.05 (F); 0.3 (M) 0.00001 (F) 1.0 (F); 1.0 (M)	81000.(F) 9.0 64.0 430. 15.0 100. 6.0 (F); 9.0 (M) 37.0 (F); 128.(M) 310. 50.0 (F); 104.(M) 1000. 20.0 (F); 1.0 (M) 100. 100. 100. 10.0 2.1 200 150.
51110	20.0 (F); 5.0 (M)	200. (F); 267. (M)

^a All concentrations are in ppm. Subjective criteria were chosen using best professional judgment after consulting references listed at the end of this appendix. In general, a sample value greater than 10 times a criterion can be cause for concern.

 $^{^{}b}$ (F) = freshwater; (M) = marine

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; all date are ppm (dry wt.) unless otherwise noted; ND = not detected